



Border Politics, God, and Mammon

Don't mistreat any foreigners who live in your land. Instead, treat them as well as you treat citizens and love them as much as you love yourself. Remember, you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 19:33-34

I thoroughly hate the barbarians because they do not respect justice. They continually promulgate harsh laws to show off their prowess. They oppress [our people] and also violate treaties. They examine for hookworms and practice hundreds of despotic acts.

Chinese detainee at the
Angel Island Immigrant Detention
Center, San Francisco, 1920s

My grandmother, in one desperate moment as a young woman, contemplated suicide. Such an impulse was not uncommon among the female peers with whom she shared several months of harsh and humiliating detainment. Held on an island just a few short miles off the longed-for mainland, as many as 500 detainees at a time occupied barracks characterized by unsanitary conditions, poor diet, and cramped quarters. Perhaps greater than the physical hardship, however, was the loneliness of separation from loved ones, combined with the despair of repeated failure to satisfy stringent interrogatories for their release. The inability to recall the minutest of details (“How many steps were there to the front door of your house?”) or the presence of treatable parasites could instantly terminate one’s arduous quest to become an American citizen.

Throughout the history of U.S. immigration, the promulgation of harsh

laws and barbaric treatment was not confined to processes of entry. Foreigners suffered the imposition of exorbitant mining taxes during the Gold Rush, costly regulations regarding housing rentals, laws that prohibited harmless cultural practices, enforcement dragnets to expel the undocumented, and draconian measures like the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Japanese Internment, and California’s Proposition 187 aimed at Latino immigrants. Legislation was accompanied by informal oppression of all kinds, including ridicule, exploitation, and violence. Such social subjugation is exemplified by the experience of the mass famine-related immigration of the Irish in the 19th century. Upon arrival, they quickly fell victim to unscrupulous landlords and employers, were forced into squalid shantytowns, scammed of personal assets, and relegated to the most undesirable jobs.

One can describe America’s anti-immigrant pathology in terms of bigotry and racism, but it is economic preservation, or the fear of losing “the American way of life,” that ultimately sits at the heart of every such episode. Throughout our history, and without exception, immigrants have played the role of scapegoat in times of recession, under-employment, and national insecurity. This, of course, is merely a logical extension of the fact that well-being in our society is evaluated almost solely in terms of material wealth and possession. Described sociologically, America puts its trust in the rewards and “virtues” of free-market capitalism. Biblically, to put one’s ultimate trust in anything or anyone other than God is idolatry.

The inability of the American church to confess its economic idolatry is evident in the immigration policy debate. We are more responsive to legality than hospitality. We have essentially reduced human beings to economic commodities, labeled as either assets or threats to the American economy. We affirm

“pathways to naturalization” while empowering enforcement agencies with greater latitude to detain or deport. Proposals to brand the undocumented as felons, or to criminalize those who extend them mercy, do not appear to disturb many of us. We demonstrate little discomfort with the institutionalization of underpaid foreign labor pools that serve primarily to maintain high corporate profit margins. Perhaps most egregious is our reluctance to examine the relationship between our Latin American free-trade policies and the desperate flight of displaced workers, particularly from the agricultural sector, across our borders. Bowing to the dictates of the market, we lose our moral bearings. Under such a darkened spiritual condition, people are dehumanized and inevitably crushed.

Stuart Shepard, representing *Focus on the Family*, was accurate when he recently maintained that the immigration issue is not something that has traditionally defined a [mainstream] evangelical. That immigration policy is largely off the evangelical radar betrays a failure to recognize that how we treat people, regardless of their origin or commercial value, is a profoundly Christian issue. The disposition of the American evangelical church to pick and choose what it cares about may be consistent with a pluralistic, democratic society, but it eschews biblical integrity. Are we not called to extend mercy to the widow, the orphan, the stranger in our midst? Are we at liberty to relegate God’s commands beneath the economic imperative of self and state, thereby serving more than one Master? We must ask ourselves how it is that we can exuberantly proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord in this country while quietly kneeling at the altar of Mammon. ■

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